

Here today...

Andy Warhol once said that, "In the future everyone will have 15 minutes of fame." But is that enough these days?



PHOTO BY MONICA MURPHY

One day, Bill Wasik decided to try an experiment, to see if people would show up, just for the hell of it, in New York City, simply because they got an email. Within months, people started showing up in places all over the world. Then they stopped.

BY ROSETTE ROYALE
STREET NEWS SERVICE

Remember Samuel Joseph Wurzelbacher? Chances are, that name doesn't set off bells of recognition. But if someone said "Joe the Plumber," you might recall that shaved-headed man who questioned Barack Obama on the campaign trail, about small business tax. For a while, his face, his nickname, they were everywhere, as TV shows and newspapers and blogs and the Republican Party became obsessed with the guy. And then — he seemed to fall away into oblivion.

Or how about Thomas Beatie? He's the transgender man who announced he was pregnant. That picture of him — with his military haircut and chin stubble — touching his swelled, there's-a-baby-inside belly was an internet hit. He even appeared on Oprah, to the delight and confusion of millions of viewers: A pregnant man? But wait: Is he really a man? The blogosphere was a-twitter. Then... he disappeared, resurfacing just long enough to announce he'd had a girl, before falling below the waves of obscurity yet again.

There are more people like Joe and Thomas out there: Short-lived media sensations who, for a few weeks, maybe a couple of months, appear to be everywhere. Until, at some point, they're not. Gone. Bye-bye. Forgotten. Which begs the question: Why? Why does it keep happening? And what does it mean, that our attention gets drawn to ephemeral distractions?

Maybe Bill Wasik knows. What's that? Ain't heard of him? Well, not yet, you haven't. But chances are you might be

familiar with something Wasik did: He created "flash mobs," those seemingly impromptu actions where dozens, maybe hundreds, of people, brought together by the Internet, would converge on a department store, bar, train station and do something — then leave. His experiences with an idea that led to a social phenomenon caused him to consider, on a deeper level, how our interconnected, hyper, hyped-up media culture influences our lives. And how we, in turn, influence the media.

These observations are gathered in "And Then There's This: How Stories Live and Die in Viral Culture," (Viking, \$25.95), a rollicking ride through some of the sensations of the past few years, their stories presented in bits, bytes, graphs and charts that take a longer look at the impact of the transitory. Speaking from New York, Wasik, a senior editor at Harper's, let loose on social science, YouTube fame and the concept of the "nanostory."

Rosette Royale: You start off your book with Blair Hornstine. What was Blair's story?

Bill Wasik: Blair Hornstine was a high school student in New Jersey and there was a dispute over whether she would be named valedictorian of her high school or whether it would be declared a tie with another boy. When the principal declared a tie, Blair sued the school to become valedictorian. And of course this became a big media circus where, "Oh, this litigious society. This girl is suing to become valedictorian!" and it became fodder for all the cable news shows and all the Internet sites. It was this classic media tempest in a teapot.

I could have picked almost any similar story to begin with, to set this up an example of what I call a "nanostory." A word I coined to describe the basic unit of the media culture that we live in where these tiny little stories flit through the public consciousness, and they bounce around on cable TV and bounce around on blogs — and then, within the space of a week or a month, they're gone, and we never think about them again.

I picked her in particular because I thought her story was funny and memorable — but not memorable — and because her story was on around the same time I was carrying on with my flash mob experiment. So, I felt that just like flash mobs — which we'll talk about in a minute — became a little media story, the two stories were in the same field of little media phenomena.

R.R.: Well, our minute is up, so we're gonna go right to the flash mob. You started it. What exactly is it? And how did it come into being?

B.W.: Flash mobs were gatherings of people that would come together, via e-mail or text message, for no reason, in a public place. Maybe they would do something absurd, but people who would come together for 10 minutes or less and then disperse. The idea was they would be completely ephemeral, they would be essentially leaderless, and then they would be completely apolitical and absurd, and then people would melt away into the distance.

This grew out of a little e-mail experiment that I did in New York in the summer of

2003, and the obvious question I asked myself was: How many people would come out for something like that? So I put together an e-mail and I sent it to 50 or 60 of my friends and acquaintances, and they forward it to people who forward it to people, and just two or three mobs in, we had 300 people coming out for these little absurd gatherings.

The crazier thing was, within just a few weeks of the first one, they had spread to cities all across the country and then soon after that, to cities all around the world. And then by September — maybe three or four months after that — everybody just completely stopped talking about them. It was again one of these phenomena that became a little fad and then it became overexposed and then suddenly nobody was interested in them anymore.

R.R.: When your flash mob started, did you think it would work?

B.W.: Y'know, I did have an idea that it would be somewhat successful, because it was a fun idea. It was silly, but it was easily understood. It was a contagious idea. And there was a sort of thrill to it, a secret-agency feeling where you're passing around this e-mail, then you're going out and doing something that no one suspects.

At a certain point, it succeeded beyond my wildest expectations, at which point I was on the outside of it like everybody else, looking at this phenomena thinking, "Why the heck are people so excited about this idea?" Even though I was the guy who

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